

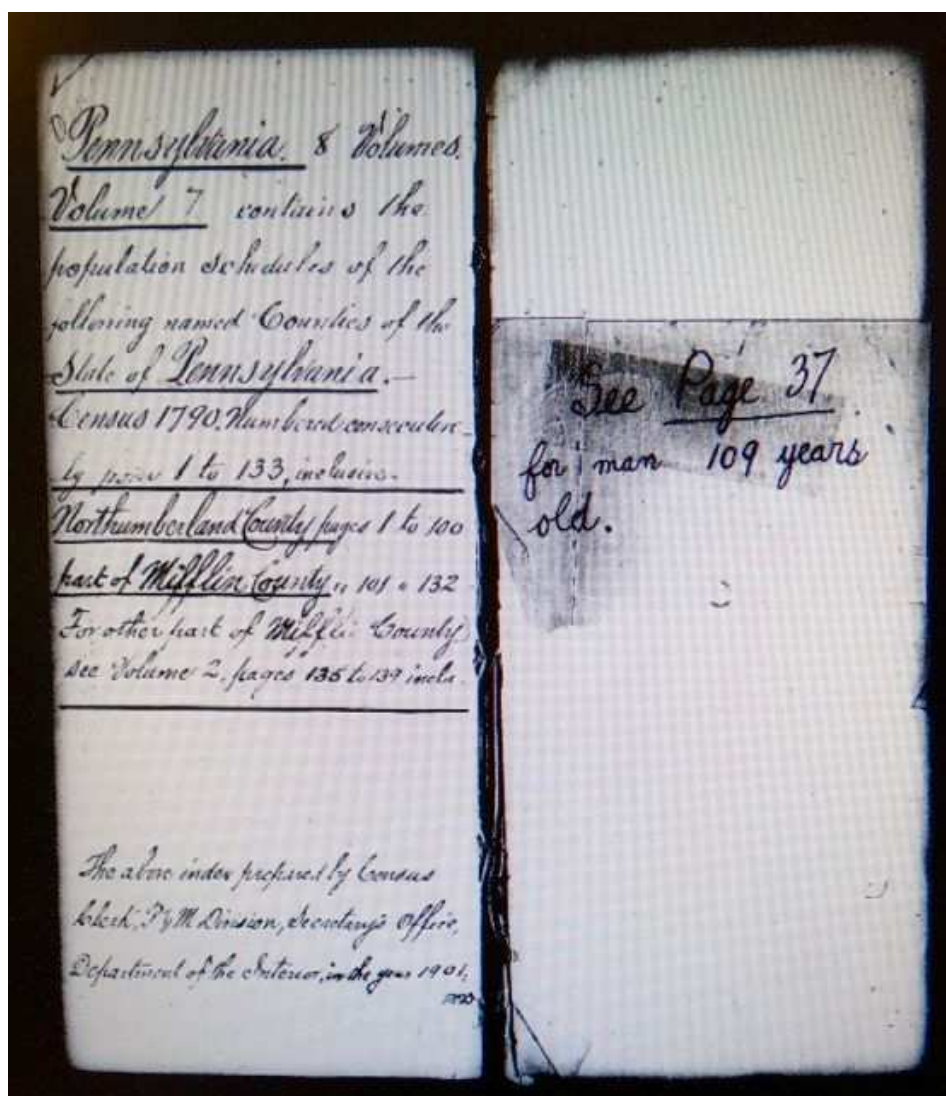
**The 1790 Census:
Portrait of the Susquehanna Frontier
by
Bruce Teeple**

Introduction

Whenever governments compile information, it tends to create political and logistical nightmares. Even two hundred years ago, paranoia and petty regional jealousies dictated how much information George Washington's administration could gather on American citizens. We usually hear how important the 1790 Census was in determining who was represented in the legislature. If we take the time to count these numbers, though, those simple, hand-drawn columns also provide a surprising snapshot of the upper Susquehanna frontier.

The 1790 Census, the first ever conducted by our government, is a treasure trove of information, but it has some inherent shortcomings. Most censuses provide such information as the participants' ages, the location of their homes, and their occupations. We take all of that for granted in later censuses, but you will not find that information in this one. It is also impossible to compare this census with the next one. Enumerators listed names in the 1800 Census alphabetically. The 1790 Census lists, however, are spatial; they go from neighbor to neighbor. There is still plenty of material in this census, though, to show us how the Susquehanna watershed's population changed over time.¹

¹ We can view digital copies of Northumberland County's original handwritten census schedules on Ancestry.com. Similar forms in many other states, unfortunately, were lost over the years. Although you need to purchase an Ancestry subscription, the site will search for your ancestor after you type in the name. Libraries and historical societies also often have census records either in hardbound volumes or on microfilm. This census, by itself, does not provide enough information to pinpoint where your ancestor lived. To do that, you will need to coordinate your research with maps, tax records and other court documents



The title page of Northumberland County's 1790 Census is on the left. On the right-hand page is an all-too-human reaction, where someone notes an inhabitant claiming to be 109 years-old.

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Why Take a Census?

Censuses are as inevitable as death and taxes. The then three-year-old U.S. Constitution authorized taking these snapshots every ten years for several practical reasons. These included:

- 1) To collect taxes – Contrary to popular misconceptions, the revolution was not about abolishing taxes. Part of the fight was over taxation without representation, and states had to pay their fair share of the bills incurred by that revolution.
- 2) To assess military manpower requirements - You cannot defend yourself if you do not have the muscle.
- 3) To gauge the fledgling nation's potential for industrial growth - In other words, will you have enough people to do the job, any job, now and in the future? That is why this census divides the counts of free white males between those above and below the age of 16.
- 4) To ensure equal representation in Congress as the population grows and moves. Linking the census numbers to taxation discouraged states from exaggerating their total number of residents.

Who Conducted It and When?

Congress made U.S. marshals (in Northumberland County's case, James Potter) responsible for hiring deputies and supervising the 1790 census. Marshals and their

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deputies began their enumeration on Monday, 2 August 1790, and had to complete their work nine months later. The official snapshot date would be the starting date,

The Number of Persons within my division, consisting of twenty-two thousand three hundred and forty-three appears in Schedule herunto annexed, exhibited by me, this twenty-seventh day of April one thousand Seven hundred and Ninety-one
James Potter Assistant to the Marshal of Penna.

Names	of heads of families	Male under 16	Male 16 & over	Female under 16	Female 16 & over	Slaves
John Reasner	1	2	2	0	0	
Joseph Hudson	1	3	0	0	0	
William Heddings	2	0	2	0	0	
William Heddings Jr.	1	1	1			
Adam Humbler	1	1	1			
Michael Shurtz	1	3	2			
Samuel Cox	1	3	3			
Benj ⁿ Williams	1	5	3			
John Mitchel	1	3	5			
David Blea	1	7	2			
Alex ^r & Phil ^s McCalla	2	2	5			
Samuel Lease	1	4	4			
John Patton	1	0	1			
Phillip Hedrick	2	2	3			
Patrick Callaghan	1	4	3			
John Wilson	1	1	2			
Dominick McDonald	1	1	2			
James McElwey	4	3	5			
Joseph Gray Clarke	1	2	4			
Jacob Gray	3	0	4			
Daniel McDonald	3	0	4	2	0	
John Pontius	1	2	4			
William Stephens	1	2	1			
Stephen Fidler	1	1	2			
Total	44	60	68	2	0	

James Potter certifies this as the official count for Northumberland County. Each page has an average of 22 to 25 names. Potter lists the names from neighbor to neighbor rather than alphabetically, as would be the case with the 1800 census. Labels for each of the census's five categories – free white males above and below 16, females, other free persons, and slaves – are at the top of each column. Tallies of each column are at the bottom of the page. Note that Potter also uses the 18th century convention of making the first “s” (as in John Reasner and Joseph Hudson, the first two names) look like an “f.”

regardless of the day the information was gathered. As long as you were still alive on or born after 2 August, they counted you. For example, if the enumerator knocks on your door in January, and your spouse died back in October, the deceased was alive on 2 August and therefore still included.

Enumerators had to visit every household and then post results in the two most public places within the jurisdiction. The job was hardly popular. Most people were even more suspicious of census takers than they were of the government. Governments elsewhere tended to use census information to monitor religious affiliation and levy taxes. This explains why the 1790 census, compared to other census years, does not yield many details. Those who refused to answer questions were fined \$25, with the marshal and government splitting the difference.

Compensating Census Takers

How much were census takers paid? If you covered a city or town with less than 5,000 persons, the government paid a dollar for every 300 counted. Rural trackers received a dollar for every 150 persons, and enumerators in more remote areas got a dollar for every 50 persons. The local federal judge determined each of these categories.

The government provided a sample form, but enumerators had to buy their own paper, which was neither cheap nor readily available. Enumerators also had to make their own copies, hand rule each page, and pay for all supplies.

How Many Lived Here?

This first census shows who was living in “Mother Northumberland,” a vast area of northern Pennsylvania now including Union and over twenty other counties. Exactly 16,965 biological people had already flooded these hinterlands, hoping to improve their situations during the post-Revolutionary economic crises. (They are “biological” only because the “Founding Fathers” decided enslaved Africans legally were fractions.) The basis of this census was the household, usually headed by a male. With almost 3,000 households, we find an average household size of 5-6 people.

Who Lived Where?

John Kelly Esq	2	7	4	0	0	Richard Irwin	3	4	2	
Mrs Hannah	1	0	2	0	0	William Dundas	2	3	6	
John Linn	2	2	3	0	1	James McLaughlin	1	6	3	
Thomas Elder	2	2	3	0		John McLaughlin	1	2	4	
James Elder	1	1	1			Robert Lowmley	1	3	3	
Robert Elder	1	0	1			William Blayke	1			
William Nichols	2	0	2			Robert Carnahan	1	2	2	
Arthur Cleland	2	5	3			Agnes Hunter	0	1	2	
Joseph Patterson	1	1	4			Alex. Crumple	1	4	3	
John Wean	2	3	3			John Carmody	1	0	1	
Isaac Bear	1	2	1			Geoffrey Denning	1	1	2	
Henry Hennicks	2	2	1			William Mahay	1	3	4	
William Wilson	1					John Mackey	1	0	1	
James Buchanan	3	0	2			James Law	2	0	2	
Henry Tardings	4	0	2			Joseph Moore	1	1	3	
Joseph Brondage	3	3	5			Richard Steel	1	1	3	
Nancy Dempsey	0	2	1			Robert Finney	1	0	1	
Joseph Poake	1	5	3			Lazarus Finney	1	2	2	
James S. Poake	3	0	4			Peter Wilton	3	1	4	
Geo. & Moses Dickey	2					Robert Martin	1	6	4	
James Donally	1	2	3			Isaac Hux	2	1	2	
Amos Fleckle	2	1	6			Alex. Stephens	2	2	5	
Joseph Darlington	1	3	2			Setenie Vertz	2	3	3	
Leannor Groninger	1	0	5			Nicholas Welsh	1	1	3	
Daniel Gollens	2	0	1			Ludwig Welsh	1	2	3	
Jacob Groninger	1	0	1			Daniel McComb	1	4	2	
William Tardings	1	0	4			Calob Faveley	1	2	3	
Ephraim Denagh	1	1	4			Sam. McLaughlin	2	0	1	
John Brown	1	1	2			John O'Brien	1	1	2	
Peter Lawryer	1	0	4			George Kellan	1	2	4	
Total	48	43	79	0	1	Sam. Houghland	1	2	1	
						Total	40	60	81	0 0

Note John Kelly's name at the top left. As an "Esquire," he is the most prominent person in the region, so we can use this as a reference point. (Incidentally, using the term 'esquire' is rather curious. Today it means a lawyer. In 1790, it was probably a British carry-over, meaning one of higher social standing. So much for revolutionary notions about radical democracy.... Later, "esquire" came to mean a justice of the peace. Furthermore, in terms of etiquette, it is incorrect to call yourself "esquire." Only others may bestow it on you as a form of address. So lawyers who put "esquire" on their stationery are technically committing a social faux pas.) There are no roads or municipalities listed, so it is difficult for modern-day researchers to get their bearings, other than being familiar with names such as Kelly, Simon Snyder, or Henry Antes.

We also see "Mrs. Hannah" and about half way down, "Nancy Dempsey" listed on the left. Mrs. Hannah has a son over 16 and two females, who may be either daughters, a mother, mother-in-law, or hired help, so Mr. Hannah may have abandoned his family; otherwise "Mrs." would be listed as "Widow." Nancy Dempsey runs a household most likely as the older sister of two younger brothers and an additional female.]

The political landscape of the Upper Susquehanna Valley in 1790 appears unfamiliar to modern eyes. Few roads, villages or townships existed as we know them today. The only way to get your bearings while reading this census is by recognizing the names of prominent neighbors. These are often the first names, listed as either “Reverend” or “Esquire,” at the top of the page. They are likely the “go-to” people, signaling that you’re in a new neighborhood. Most of these names are familiar: Simon Snyder in Selinsgrove, James Potter in present-day Centre County, Henry Antes near present-day Jersey Shore, and Samuel Maclay and John Kelly in present-day Union County.

Ethnicity

The only way we can analyze ethnicity at this early date is to look at family names. As a rule, newcomers to any locale tend to stick with their own kind for a generation or two, so cultural and linguistic chauvinism probably inhibited much intermarriage.

We can also read between the lines with this census. At this point, those with English/Scots-Irish names outnumbered ethnic Germans by about 3 to 1, but this was a decade of transition. German newcomers began flooding the region, tending to live, procreate, buy land and vote in the richer agricultural lands of the lower Susquehanna watershed, rather than in the West Branch Valley. And they stayed.

Spelling

Many family names were spelled differently then. Spelling was phonetic, according to English ears, especially when it moves from German to English consonants, such as “D” to “T” or “B” to “P.” Today’s Kerstetter was “Castater” (i.e., one from Karstädt). Yocum was “Yeocom” and “Yeokim” (from Joachim). Bowersox was “Powersocks” (from “Bauer” and “Sachs,” i.e., a Saxon farmer). Philip Vaneda (whose descendants now spell the family name at least thirteen different ways) came from the town of Neida, hence “von Neida.”

We cannot look at spelling from a 21st century perspective. Spelling is consistent with the recorder, but respondents, even if literate, did not necessarily spell their names the same way. Most likely, no one cared because spelling was not a priority. There were

no Social Security cards, driver's licenses or "voter IDs." The courthouse had your deed on file. You, your family and neighbors knew who you were. That was all that mattered.

Categories

The 1790 Census only has five categories:

- 1) free white males under the age of 16;
- 2) free, white males over the age of 16;
- 3) females;
- 4) other (i.e., free persons regardless of race or gender); and
- 5) slaves

There were about 9000 free white males in Northumberland County. Half were above and half were below the age of 16, but this census does not tell us what anyone did for a living.

Approximately 8000 females lived here. Their age was irrelevant since women technically did not vote, fight, or work (ok, at least "officially"). The census classified ninety-nine people as "Other."

Slavery

Eighty-four individuals in Northumberland County (less than 1% of Northumberland County's total population) made up the fifth group: slaves. This section did not differentiate between men, women or children. It was just one blanket category with no legal status.... like counting mules.

Fifty households (less than 2% of the county's total) had slaves. Over 90% of these slave-owners were Scots-Irish. The average slave-owner here had one or two slaves. Two households owned five slaves, one had six, and one owned seven.

3	Names of Heads of Families	Self white males	Self white females	Self white males	Self white females	Self white males	Self white females
	John Berick	4	1	1	0	0	
	Jacob Wiefe	2	3	4	0	0	
	Frederick Wiefe	2	3	3	0	0	
	Andrew Pontius	1	2	5	0	0	
	Phillip High	3	1	5	0	0	
	Christ ^m Borough	1	1	3	0	0	
	David Burd	1	2	4	0	0	
	William Fisher	1	2	3	0	0	
	Henry Aurandorff	1	1	3	0	0	
	Henry Gasher	1	2	2	0	0	
	Samuel Casothers	1	0	3	0	0	
	John Huntsman	1	2	1	0	0	
	William Huntsman	1	0	1	0	0	
	James Huntsman	2	2	2	0	0	
	Christ ^m Johnston	1	1	6	0	0	
	Andrew Greenhoe	3	1	1	0	0	
	Jacob Wiese Jun ^r	1	0	1	0	0	
	James Christie	1	0	4	0	0	
	Robert Buspel	1	0	1	0	0	
	Widow Lowrey	7	0	2	0	0	
	Hugh Lowrey	1	1	2	0	0	
	Robert Street	1	0	1	0	0	
	Allen Scroggs	1	2	3	0	0	
	John Ward	1	0	1	0	0	
	Anthony Lightle	1	1	5	0	0	
	Total	41	28	67	0	0	
	William Huston	1	3	3	0	0	
	Samuel Lyons	1					
	Jacob Prichle	1	0	1	0	0	
	Emmott Moore	1	4	2	0	0	
	William Anderson	2	4	2	0	0	
	Daniel Sampson	1	3	2	0	0	
	Christ ^m Vangundy Jun ^r	1					
	Alex ^r Wignady sen ^r	1	1	2	0	0	
	Alex ^r Wignady Jun ^r	1	1	1	0	0	
	James Forster	1	1	2	0	0	
	Jean Forster	2	0	4	0	0	
	John Glendiman	1					
	Leamond Peters	1	1	2	0	0	
	Christ ^m Wiefes	1	3	3	0	0	
	Thomas Forster	2	3	3	0	0	
	And ^r Forster	1	4	3	0	0	
	Robert Forster	1	3	3	0	0	
	Benj ^m Wells	1	0	1	0	0	
	Thomas Harvitt	1	0	1	0	0	
	Christ ^m Dale sen ^r	5	0	2	0	0	
	Christ ^m Dale Jun ^r	1	1	1	0	0	
	Henry Dale	1	1	1	0	0	
	John Lawin	1	0	1	0	0	
	John Clarke	1	0	2	0	1	
	Joseph Clarke	2	2	5	0	0	
	David Watson	4	2	5	0	1	
	Elias Youngman	2	0	1			
	Georgel Youngman	1	1	1			
	John Friesbaugh	1	1	1			
	Total	41	30	55	0	2	

Each name in this census is the head of a household. Almost all are men; few, such as Widow Lowrey on the left, are female. You will often see clusters of family names in the same vicinity, such as the three Huntsmans on the left and the five Forsters on the right. This, however, causes problems in determining relationships. Since this census does not tell us anyone's age, we have no idea who is a father, brother or son to the others. Note slave owners John Clarke and David Watson listed on the right.]

Birth Origins

The place of one's birth is not just a modern topic of controversy. Other than from last names, we have no idea who was "native-born" and who was born elsewhere. Widespread racism and xenophobia would cause the 1830 and 1840 censuses to address these phony, irrelevant issues.

Conclusion

The wealth of information in later censuses has spoiled genealogists and social historians, compared to the frustration they get from the 1790 Census.

Any tabulation generates some controversy or is open to charges of bias. This census was no different. Working within a nine-month deadline and facing considerable logistical problems, complaints were inevitable. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and fellow Southerners believed the census would short-change representation from states below the Mason-Dixon Line because of a more scattered population, substandard roads, and a host of hostile citizens.

When we look back at the enormity of this task - given the time, the people, the technology, the political sentiments, and the transportation networks - it's a wonder the census takers achieved what they did when they did.

At least it was a start.

Note

A microfilm copy of the 1790 census of Pennsylvania is available at the Society's Courthouse Office. Microfilm copies of most other U.S. decennial censuses of Union County through 1930 are available there for study. Mary Belle Lontz has produced name indexes organizing the names appearing in each census, for many of the censuses from 1790 to 1930, facilitating the search for particular names in the censuses. The Lontz indexes are also available in the Society office. In addition, the printed census tabulations for Union County localities, including names of household heads, issued by the Bureau of the Census are available at our courthouse office. Censuses after 1850 provide names of all household members and other interesting information.

